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VĀLMĪKI-RĀMĀYĀNA
AN OCEAN OF SUGGESTIVE POETRY

It was but a universal truism that the Kashmirian poet-rhetorician Ānandavardhana, promulgator of the theory of *Dhvani* or 'Poetic suggestion' in literature, echoed, when he stated in his well-known *Dhvanyāloka* in the couplet:

apāre kāvyasarhsāre kavir ekaḥ prajāpatih /
yathā 'smai rocate viśvān tathedam parivartate //
(Summary verse under III. 42)

'In the boundless realm of poetry, the poet is the lone creator.
The world turns as he would wish'.

The above utterance, obviously made on his own personal experience, is pregnant with significance. In the land of poesy, an imaginative and intuitive poet can turn the world as he would wish, view it from any angle he chooses, take up for treatment any aspect thereof as it suits him, attribute or even impute meanings as he pleases, — all these consciously. But the words and expressions that issue from his pen, automatically and unconsciously, could often express much more than what they literally mean. Indeed that is the hallmark of great poets. The burden of *Dhvani* or 'Poetic suggestion' is very much the same (cf. *anurānanadhvani*).

Here again, it is worth mentioning that, more often than not, on inspired moments, when the 'glance of the Goddess of Learning' (*Sarasvatikatākṣa*) falls on them, the words of poets carry more far-

reaching meanings than even what they actually mean. To cite a telling instance from Ācārya Śaṅkara's *Saundaryalaharī*:

*Bhavāni tvam dāse mayi vitara dr̥ṣṭim sakaruṇām
iti stoturū vāñcchan kathayati 'Bhavāni tvam' iti vah /
tadaiva tvam tasmai diśasi nijasāyujyapadavīm
mukunda-brahmendra-sphuṭamukuṭanīrājitatapadām //*

(Saundarya., 22)

Here, the devotee intends to pray to Mother Goddess to turn on him Her kindly glance, with the words, '*Bhavāni tvam dāse mayi vitara dr̥ṣṭim sakaruṇām*'. However, hardly had he uttered only the first two words '*Bhavāni tvam*', which, incidentally mean, 'May I become you yourself', the Goddess, acting upon the meaning of those two words only, offers him her own place of bliss.

It was given to the great Sanskrit dramatist Bhavabhūti to make the telling statement that in the case of great men, whatever they utter, the intended meanings attach themselves to the words uttered: Cf.:

*laukikānām tu sādhūnām arthān vāg anuvartate /
ṛṣīnām punar ādyānām vācam artho 'nudhāvati //*

(Uttarārāmacarita, I. 10)

'In the case of worldly men, their words accord with the meanings intended, but in the case of the ancient sages the intended meanings run after the words they utter'.

From the emotional-psychological point of view no better illustration need be offered in the above matter than the verse that gave birth to the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself, viz., the hoarse outburst of sage Vālmīki on seeing one of the two love-lorn herons falling by the hunter's arrow:

*mā niśāda pratiṣṭhām tvam agamah śāśvatīḥ samāḥ /
yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam //*

(VRĀ. 2.15)

'Oh hunter! For having shot down one of the two love-lorn herons, may you not obtain solace for all years to come'.

Immediately, however, the rustic sage, given only to penance and austerities, was aghast that a rhyming verse, well knit and true to

metre, had come out of his mouth in that moment of anger and anguish. And, that is great poetry!

In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* there occur a number of passages which, over and above the literal sense apparent from the context, reveal a deeper, subtler meaning or even meanings. Here it is for the connoisseur and the commentator to ferret out the underlying meanings. As the saying goes:

kavitā-rasa-mādhuryam vyākhyātā vetti no kavih /

'The beauteous charm of a poem is really sensed by the commentator (and connoisseur), rather than by the poet himself'.

Among factors that facilitate depth-commenting in Sanskrit might be mentioned: one, the multiplicity of meanings of words; two, simple words signifying meanings also through their derivations; three, compound words, though having a composite sense, drawing also upon the meanings of the component words and four, specific senses drawn from the wealth of allusions from the vast field of epic, puranic and philosophical lore. Indeed, commentators fully utilise all these fecund sources in expositing deeper and deeper meanings in even commonplace words, but fully pertinent to the context. Incidentally it might be observed that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a treasurehouse for all types of *dhvani*-s classified by Ānandavardhana in his *Dhvanyāloka*, like *Arthāntara-saṅkramitavācyā*, *Atyantatiraskṛtvācyā* and the different varieties of *Asaṁlakṣyakrama-vyaṅgyā* such as *rasa*, *bhāva*, *vastu* and so on. Ānandavardhana himself refers to this aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. (Dhv., p. 6, edn. by K. Krishnamoorthy, Delhi, 1982).

Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa is apparently one of the most lucid poems in Sanskrit, couched in simple, straightforward narrative style. But a closer examination of the verses and the individual words would reveal that every other word and expression therein is pregnant with suggested meanings. The more one is attuned to the poem, the more one is versed in the nuances of literary criticism, of the philosophies, of religion, of *Dharmaśāstra*, and of Vedic and puranic lore, the more would one be aware of the subtler and subtler meanings embedded therein. Whether Vālmīki meant of all of them or only some, is a moot question.

It is intended to draw the attention of scholars to this aspect of

Vālmīki's verses as pointed out by commentators like Govindarāja (16th cent.)¹ and Periyavāccān Pillai (12th cent.)² and more recent expositors like Tetiyoor Subrahmanya Sastri³.

Take, for instance, the verse *ahān vedmi* etc. (VRĀ. *Bāla.*, 19.14) which forms the words of sage Viśvāmitra who had come to king Daśaratha requesting that prince Rāma might be sent with him to the forest to protect his sacrifice from being defiled by demons. Through this verse the sage impresses upon the doting Daśaratha that the prowess of Rāma was better known to him than to the king himself. The verse states:

*ahān vedmi mahātmānaḥ Rāmam satyaparākramam /
Vasiṣṭhaḥ 'pi mahātejā ye ceme tapasi sthitāḥ //*

Studied in intensity, the different expressions in the verse blossom out into a cluster of exquisite meanings. Thus the expression *ahān vedmi* through which the sage contrasts his understanding with that of the king would mean:

1. *I know, on account of the purity of my mind, as stated in manasā tu viśuddhenā (Viśṇudharmottara, 275.2) that which is not cognised by the mortal eye (vide Mundakopaniṣad, 3.1.8, na cakṣuṣā gṛhyate) which alone you possess.*

2. *I know because, as stated in the Mahābhārata (Sabhāparvan, 33.12), I have received my training from several learned men (jñānavṛddhā mayā rājan bahavaḥ paryupāsitāḥ), but not by you who have been taught only by ordinary men.*

3. *I know since I hold the holy grasses kuśa and darbha in my hands, but not you who hold only the weapons, bow and arrow, in your hands.*

1. *Śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, a critical edition with the commentary of Śrī Govindarāja and extracts from many other commentaries and readings. Ed. and Publ. by T.R. Krishnacharya and T.R. Vyasaṭharya of Kumbhakonam, 7 vols., Bombay, N.S. Press, 1911-13.

2. *Periyavāccān Pillai aruḷicceyya Śrī Rāmāyaṇa Taniślokam*, (Tamil), with the Tamil comm. of Krishnaswami Ayyangar, Repr. Tiruchirappalli, n.d., 2 vols.

3. *Śrīmad Vālmīki Rāmāyanam*, Sundarakāṇḍam, comm. in Tamil by Tetiyoor Subrahmanya Sastrigal, Madras-18, Gurukulam, Abhiramapuram, Repr. 1952.

4. *I know* because I am wearing the holy locks on my head, but not you who wear the kingly crown.

5. *I know* because I am *sāttvik* by nature but not you who are *rājasik* in nature.

6. *I know* since I have sat at the feet of teachers as required in the *Dharmaśāstras* (cf. *nīca-śayyāsanam cāsyā nityam gurusannidhau*, *Manu.*, 2.198) and not you who are seated high on the throne (*siṁhāsane prabhuh*).

7. *I know* because I am a knower of *yoga* (*yogin*), but not you who are just an enjoyer (*bhogin*).

8. *I know* since I perform sacrifices for enlightened emancipation, but not you who perform sacrifices for sheer progeny.

9. *I know* who am engaged in *dharma* (duty) and *mokṣa* (emancipation) but not you who are engaged in *artha* (wealth) and *kāma* (desires).

Viśvāmitra continues: 'Oh king! You know Rāma only as *rāma*, a handsome young boy, but I know him as a *mahātmā*, in all the senses in which the word *ātmā* is employed', viz.:

ātmā jīve dhṛtam dehe svabhāve paramātmani /

yatne 'rke 'gnau matau vāte..... //

(Vaijayanṭī-koṣa, Dvyakṣarakāṇḍa, 1.6)

That is: 1. *I know* him as a great *jīva* identified in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*, 5.7.26, *ya ātmani tiṣṭhan ātmano 'ntarah* ('one who rests in the *ātman* and pervades the *ātman*').

2. *I know* him as of great valour (*dhṛti*).

3. *I know* him as the great body (*deha*), having a 'permanent body' (*nityam nityākṛtidharam*) stated for the Lord Viṣṇu (*Sāttvata-Sainhītā*).

4. *I know* him as one of steadfast nature (*svabhāva*) as implied in statements like *abhayaṁ sarvabhūtebhyo dadāmy etad vrataṁ mama*, 'It is my nature to offer refuge to all beings' (VRā., *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 18.34).

5. *I know* him as *paramātman*, the great soul beyond which there is nothing as stated by *yasmāt param nāparam asti kiñcit* (Tait. Āraṇyaka, 10.10.3).

6. I know him as one who endeavours most (*mahā-yatna*) (cf. *prayatnah svātmadharmaḥ syāt*).

7. I know him as the Sun (*arka*) (vide Rāma described later in VRā. as *rāmadivākarah* ('the Sun of a Rāma'), VRā. *Sundara*, 17.18).

8. I know him as the great Fire (*agni*) (cf. Bharata's words in the *Ayodhyākānda*, 99.26: *abhitaḥ pāvakopamam*).

9. I know him as the great intelligence (*buddhi*) (cf. the description later, of Rāma as 'one of eightfold intelligence', *buddhyā hy aṣṭāṅgayā yuktaḥ*, (VRā. (*Sundara*., 116.27).

10. I know him as the great wind (*vāyu*), even as the Lord is described in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, 1.14.31: *tasmai vātātmane namah*.

Rāma is also *satya-parākrama*, valour personified, as typified later in statements like '(rākṣasāḥ sarve) hatāny ekena rāmeṇa', 'the entire body of demons were felled by Rāma singly' (VRā. *Āranya*., 26.36).

To take another verse, being the parting words of queen Sumitrā to her son Lakṣmaṇa who was accompanying Rāma and Sītā to the forest in exile for fourteen years:

*Rāmām Daśarathām viddhi māṁ viddhi Janakātmajām /
Ayodhyām aṭavīṁ viddhi gaccha tāta yathāsukham //*
(VRā. *Ayodhyā*., 40.8)

'Consider Rāma as (your father Daśaratha). Consider Sītā as me (your mother). Consider the forest as (the city of) Ayodhyā. Son, go in peace'.

The verse lends itself to several enlightened interpretations, adumbrated by other authoritative texts.

1. Consider Rāma as 'father', for he is 'Hari or Viṣṇu' and it is stated in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, 1.9.126: *devadevo Harih pitā*, 'the lord of lords, Hari, is the father (of all)'. And Lakṣmī, of whom Sītā is an incarnation, is the mother of all, again, according to *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, 1.9.126: *tvāṁ mātā sarvalokānām*, 'You are the mother of all the worlds'. Consider the forest as the city of Ayodhyā, for it is said:

*yatra nāsti Haris tatra vastavyaiḥ na kṛtātmanā /
vastavyaiḥ yatra tatraiva yatrāste Madhusūdanah //
'Self-possessed people should not reside where Hari is not.
One should reside only where Madhusūdana (Hari) resides.'*

2. Consider Rāma as father, for it is said *jyesthabhratā pitṛsamah*. ‘The elder brother is equal to the father’, and as a corollary, the brother’s wife is equal to the mother. And the forest is Ayodhyā, for the brother wishes to reside there.

3. Consider Rāma as Daśaratha for ‘Rāma is equal to Daśaratha in personal qualities’, *guṇair Daśarathopamah* (VRā. Ayodhyā., 1.9) and Sītā is *tulyaśīlāvayovṛttā*, ‘Equal in character, age and act’ to Rāma (VRā. Sundara., 16.5).

The forest is as good as Ayodhyā, for there too ‘the sages received Rāma with auspicious hymns’ as mentioned in VRā. Āraṇya., 1.12, *māngalāni prayuñjānāḥ*.

4. Consider Rāma as father since your father Daśaratha will soon be no more, being abandoned by you three. And, I becoming a widow is worth nothing (cf. *Asatsamā vidhavā*). Moreover, the minute Rāma leaves Ayodhyā, the city will be as if it were a forest, and the forest where Rāma goes will be as if it were a city.

5. Consider Rāma as your father and Sītā as your step-mother (Kaikeyī), with all their foibles. For, as you know, heeding the words of his wife Kaikeyī, Daśaratha is sending Rāma to the forest. In the same way, his wife Sītā too will send Rāma scouring the forest for the golden deer. So follow Rāma and Sītā to the forest to be of assistance to them considering the forest as the city of Ayodhyā where you reside now.

6. Consider Rāma, not as a handsome weakling as his name would suggest, but as mighty as your mighty father Daśaratha who fought valorously against the demons. And consider Sītā as unafraid and appreciative of Rāma’s valour as I was at the valorous deeds of Daśaratha. Do not mind Ayodhyā, for that place is the real city where a valorous husband resides, even if it be the cave of a mighty tiger.

7. Consider Rāma as tenderminded as Daśaratha who will not be able to bear separation from his dear ones. So go with him for he too will not be able to bear separation from Sītā and you, even as he would state later: *na jīveyarī kṣaṇam api vinā tāṁ asitekṣaṇāṁ* (VRā. Sundara., 66.10), ‘I shall not live even for a moment separated from that black-eyed lady (Sītā)’; and *adyaivāham gamiṣyāmi Lakṣmaṇena gatāṁ gatim* (VRā. Uttara., 107.3), ‘I shall immediately take the path taken by Lakṣmaṇa’. Consider Sītā as myself for she is also destined to suffer from separation from her husband as I am destined to suffer,

being separated from my husband. Hence go with them to alleviate their suffering. Consider the forest as Ayodhyā, for the forest too is destined to dry up shortly (cf. *pariśuṣkapalāśāni*, ‘with dried up *palāśa* trees’ and *api vṛkṣāḥ parimlānāḥ*, ‘the trees have dried up’, VRā. Āranya., 59. 4-5), even as Ayodhyā is to present a pitiable sight, crying pitifully, with deranged men, weeping elephants and horses: *apabhraṣṭamanuṣyā ca dīna- nāgaturaṅgamā / ārtasvarapariglānā* (VRā. Ayodhyā., 59.15).

8. Consider Rāma not as an exile but as one who would be as crowned as king like your father Daśaratha; and so also, consider Sītā not as a forlorn lady but to be crowned as queen like myself. And think of the forest as peaceful and beneficent to sages as the city of Ayodhyā itself.

9. Consider Rāma not as one who has renounced the royal umbrella and going by foot (*padātīm varjitacchatram*, VRā. Ayodhyā., 33.5), but as one riding in the ten directions even as your father Daśaratha whose chariot could traverse all the directions. Consider Sītā not as one who has to traverse the forest on foot, but as one like me who used to travel with my husband in the aerial chariot. Also consider the forest as the Ayodhyā in which Rāma is destined to return and ride in procession along the streets majestically.

The study offered for the above-cited two verses should be a pointer to the potentialities of interpretation to which the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki lends itself to widely read and knowledgeable commentators and connoisseurs.